



2002 -Culture Communities and Change -Relevant Pages (816)

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Culture, Communities and Change



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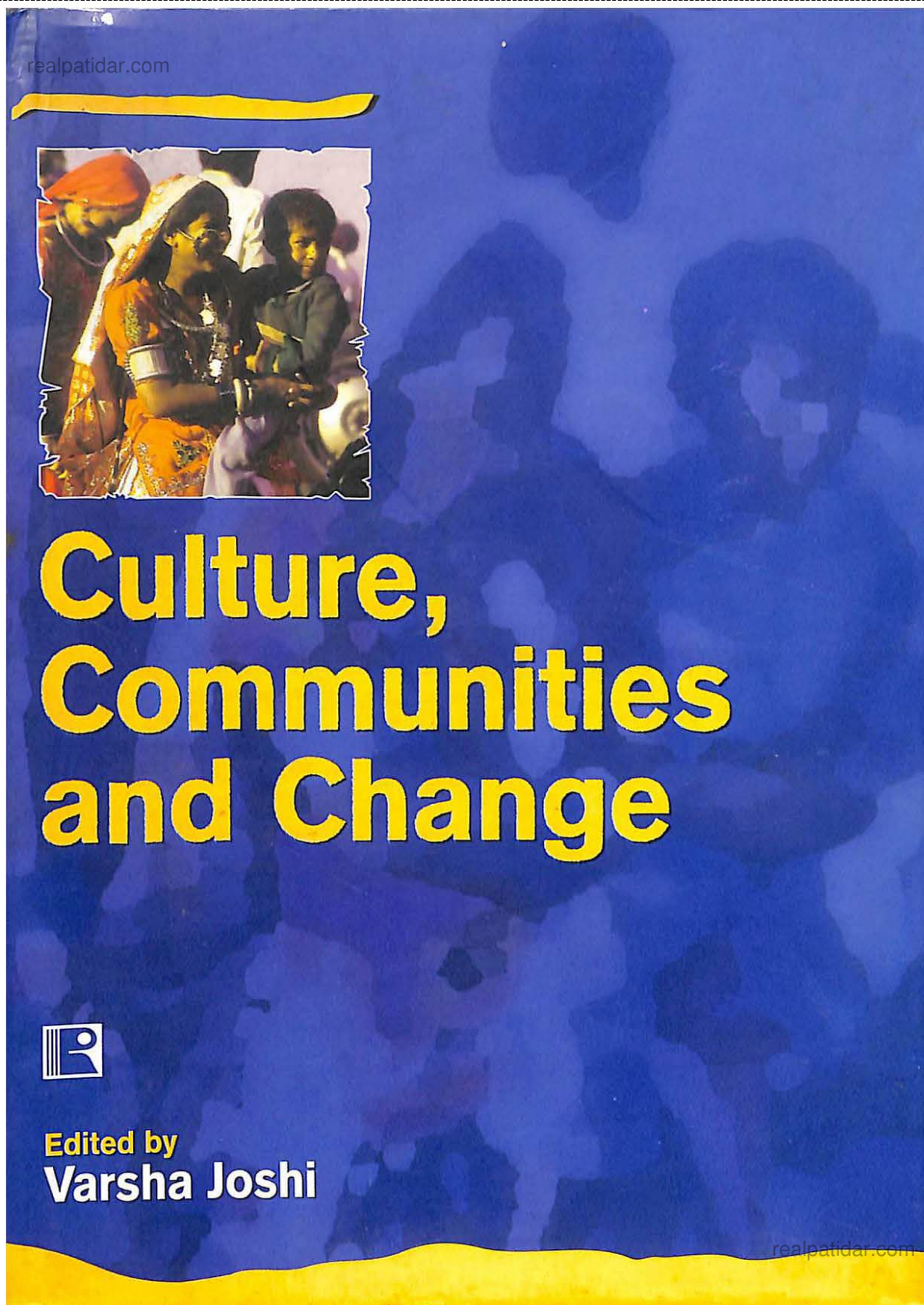
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Dominique-Sila Khan

darkness for a long period. Some Hindu devotees suggested that this mysterious event could be explained by the wrath of the Pir whose cult had been abandoned. Eventually, people decided to resume the regular worship (with offering of *chadars*, incense and roses), after which the electricity immediately came back; however the underground chamber remained closed and the cult was done in secret twice a day by a Brahman family.

The tradition is still continued, said the younger man, let me tell you my own story...and a very recent one ! It may be just one year ago, when I was invited to renovate the underground hall of Diggy Kalyanji. I have not told you, but I am a painter and a very close friend of one of the *pujaris* son...so I went there to lay a fresh coat of painting on the walls. I was made to enter the place secretly, together with my Hindu friend. And I saw it, I saw the *mazar* of the Pir and the Brahman's son told me that worship was still done regularly by his father or his uncle... I saw it all...the grave, the green *chadar*, the roses...

I immediately remembered the Shiva Lingam which was surrounded by a railing.

Where is that grave located? I asked.

Did you see the lingam in the temple? Do you understand? It is just under it and that rectangular space with the marble floor and the railing has exactly the same shape and size as that of the *mazar*...

It was clear. The Hindu object of worship had been erected exactly above the tomb of the Pir so that innocent (and ignorant) devotees should not unwittingly tread the sacred floor above the Pir's grave.

In a sense, by worshipping Shiva one also worshipped the Pir...

One could think that the underground story of Diggy Kalyanji is something unique, a rare occurrence, an exception that confirms the rule. But this is not the case: many similar examples could be given. We will give here only a few.

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The legend of the Amber goddess Shila Devi is well-known: local people and *Pujaris* often tell the same story about how human sacrifices were abandoned and replaced by animal sacrifices. The slap on the idol's face, allegedly given by the angry father of the boy who was going to be sacrificed on a particular day (or by some other villager) is said to account for the slightly bent position of the Devi's head. But there is another, lesser known version, that has been preserved, among others, by some Muslim artisan communities of Jaipur. While the mother was crying bitterly at the entrance of the shrine, knowing that her only son would soon be sacrificed, a mysterious faqir appeared in front of her and asked the reason of her grief. As soon as he learned what was going to happen the pious dervish offered to take her son's place; but at the last moment, instead of submitting himself to the cruel ritual, the faqir suddenly approached the Devi installed in her sanctum and slapped her face; before the earth swallowed him up, the faqir ordered her to stop accepting human sacrifices and be content with buffaloes and goats.

Impressed by this miracle the king and the priests decided to follow his instructions. The faqir whose mazar is at Amber, at the foot of the fort hill, was hence known as Gebi Pir (the invisible or hidden Pir)². It is easy to see that, in this version the sannyasi or Brahmanical ethos is replaced by the well-known Biblical motive of Isaac/Ishmael's sacrifice. The flavour of the tale, and so its moral, is therefore utterly different: here it is a Muslim holy man who puts an end to a cruel religious practice, whereas the mitigation of non-violence is generally attributed to the ideals of Hindu or Jain renouncer/saints, while violence is said to be a characteristic of Islam.

'Hidden Pirs' or concealed *mazars* do not exist only in Rajasthan – there are to be found everywhere. A noteworthy example is the grave of Mahamati Prannath, one of the founders of the Nijanandi/Pranami faith who is perceived by his followers as Nishkalank Budh Avatar and Akhiri Imam Mehndi. For a



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he start to publicly disclose the Pir inhabiting his body he shifts to Urdu and displays a remarkable knowledge of Islamic terminology. Otherwise, he is the same sober, composed, sincere devotee of the one God who has no name. Now, my opinion is that he is not really possessed in the sense of 'spirit possession', but rather that he has found an excellent hideout for the Pir he worships – the Pir who is threatened by the Hindu adherents of a monochrome religion. These persons, luckily, never visit the Muslim shrine where all this happens and if they meet this honest citizen at home or at his work, there can be danger as long as he appears there as a 'perfectly normal Hindu'...

Religious Dissimulation

Explanation of Taqiyya

This leads us to examine the interesting historical phenomenon of religious dissimulation, which has existed in the past in nearly all faiths and all countries; among the Shi'ia it is known as *taqiyya* – a practice which one should try to understand in order to grasp fully the shaping of religious identities in South Asia – and, in our case, the phenomenon of the 'Hidden Pir'. During a long period, being threatened by the local Sunni rulers, Ismailis practiced *taqiyya*, choosing to conceal their identities under a Sunni Sufi or a Hindu guise. As far as the latter are concerned the phenomenon deserves a particular mention as, for most Ismailis of the Nizari branch who were Hindu converts, it simply meant continuing outwardly their former customs. These people have been later referred to as Guptis.

Let me briefly describe a Gupti shrine belonging to the Imamshahi branch of Nizarism, for instance, the one that existed not long ago in Surat (Gujarat). From one side it looked like an ordinary Brahmanical temple, many a Hindu passer-by entered the shrine, rang the bell and bowed in front of the sacred idol. Only the initiated disciples could see what was behind it: a second, secret entrance, leading to a concealed upper shrine (contrary to the underground *dargah* at Diggy...); this was the



jamat-khana, or prayer hall of the Nizari Ismailis where they traditionally invoke their Imam and their Pirs.

While most Nizari Ismailis gradually went out of concealment after the arrival of their religious leaders, the Aga Khans, in India (either to follow their living Imam or to choose an altogether different identity as Hindu, Sunni or Twelver Shi'i Muslim), a few Satpanthis, as they are called, opted for a very original solution: they chose to remain Guptis, some of them giving, nonetheless their allegiance to the Aga Khan.

For the Guptis who did not follow the Aga Khan, times are difficult. After having been, for centuries, threatened by the Sunni rulers, they now have to face the wrath of the Hindu fundamentalists; the community is fragmented and divided into rival factions (Khan and Moir 2000): there are those who wish to portray their tradition as a 'full-fledged' Hindu one, those who claim that it is a Sunni Sufi movement, and finally, those who swear the Sapanth is originally Twelver Shi'i. In this way, the Hinduised leader of the Gupti community at Pirana, centre of the Imamshahi movement, Karsan Das, is also a 'hidden Pir'. As one of his, equally Gupti, opponent has recalled, he had given up his Muslim name: Pir Karim – a name he was very proud of and which he earlier used as often as the Hindu one. His spiritual master, whose ancestors had chosen a Sunni identity is thus obliged to hide himself: he is an invisible Pir. No 'Hindu Satpanthi' is supposed to know even of his existence although there are still many Guptis – including Karsan Das alias Pir Karim – who secretly accept him as a Pir and clandestinely follow the earlier 'syncretistic' Ismaili rituals. As a result the identity issue of the Imamshahis which is regularly debated at the civil courts has become completely messy; judges and advocates, having no knowledge of the deep enigmas and pitfalls of history, keep repeating the question: is the Satpanth a Hindu or a Muslim sect? And confronted by the impossibility of answering, some courageous Satpanthis have – after a very long period – acknowledged their Nizari Ismaili origin. South Asian

Saiyyed is secretly accepted as guru



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Nizarism having traditionally been 'syncretistic' permitted them to be Muslims, but 'different Muslims'⁵

For the Guptis who have accepted the Imam Aga Khan as their religious leader, the issue is totally different, although some of the consequences may appear similar. The Gupti *jamats* of Bhavnagar and Surat have chosen to follow the Aga Khan; however, all of them have not merged into the Khoja mainstream community. They have kept a separate identity and when asked: are you a Hindu or a Muslim, they quietly reply – by customs and jati we are Hindus, by religion Muslims...In doing so, they clearly defy the current binary categories accepted, not only by a majority of people, but also by the civil law and the Constitution... And they seem to repeat the words of a famous Nizari Pir: *caritar hindu andar musulman...*and – the most unluckily, forgotten – or hushed up – utterance of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of secular India who originally belonged to the Pranami tradition: I was born a Hindu... but many people thought we were inherently Muslims... (Ram 1996: 227).

Hindus by
customs
and jati...
but Muslims
by religion

An interesting phenomenon is that, in contemporary India, with the rise of fundamentalist ideals, *taqiyya*, ceasing to be an exclusively Shi'i phenomenon, is practised in various forms by a wide range of Indian communities. Rather than suppressing or destroying altogether their 'liminal' heritage, these communities prefer to keep it in some secret hiding place. We have mainly seen the cases of Hindus concealing their Muslim traditions, but it is necessary to specify that many Muslims are also trying to hide their Hindu heritage. Is it out of shame or out of fear? I would be inclined to think that, in most cases, people do this to avoid trouble. A good definition of the word *taqiyya* is precisely 'precautionary dissimulation' (Daftary 1996: 566).

taqiyya

But, assuming for the sake of argument, that they are more frightened than ashamed, can one speak of a real, conscious 'resistance', 'underground' movement? Probably not; in most cases it is the sanctity of a tradition that prevents the followers of a particular cult or movement to go too far, prompting them to